

Karas vs Kurz: Why Austria's Chancellor faces some difficult choices ahead of the 2019 European Parliament elections



Othmar Karas, the leader of the Austrian People's Party's (ÖVP) delegation to the European Parliament, is widely viewed as one of the most influential Austrian MEPs. However, as [Michael Burri](#) explains, Karas is now posing some difficult questions for the ÖVP and its Chancellor Sebastian Kurz ahead of the next European Parliament elections in May 2019.

The European Parliament (EP) recently passed a [modest electoral reform](#) package designed to address worries about another low turnout in the next EP elections in May 2019. But the bigger [worry for many](#) is that voters across Europe who rewarded anti-EU sentiment in national elections in 2017 will [do the same](#) again. A European Parliament [tailored to the agenda](#) of Eurosceptic members would make the EP a much different institution than it is today. But the latest tumult over the European Parliament elections in Austria, a country where national political sentiment turned against the EU in 2017, suggests some of the risks that such a shift can bring for ruling parties, and the situation is exposing fractures between national and European party leaders.

Situated along this fracture line is Othmar Karas, the leader of the Austrian People's Party's (ÖVP) delegation to the European Parliament. First elected to the European Parliament in 1999, Karas has worked his way through various leadership positions, including a term as an EP Vice President (2012-2014). He currently serves as Chair of the EU-Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee, and is also considered an expert on financial regulation. In Brussels, certainly, Karas has earned his spurs: according to VoteWatch, he is the [most influential](#) Austrian Member of European Parliament (MEP) and ranked among the [25 most influential](#) MEPs overall.

The voice of Austria in Brussels, Karas is understood to speak for Brussels when he is in Austria, and at home, he is widely recognised as a "European" politician. When ÖVP party chief Josef Pröll passed over the more experienced Karas in favour of Ernst Strasser as party list leader (*Spitzenkandidat*) in the 2009 EP election, Austrian voters responded by handing Karas a [resounding victory](#) over Strasser in preferential votes (*Vorzugsstimmen*). Strasser subsequently became ensnared in the "[cash for laws](#)" scandal, resigning as Austria delegation leader in 2011, a turn of events that led the Viennese daily *Die Presse* to label Karas the "anti-Strasser," wryly noting that these days he is "[celebrated as integrity become flesh](#)."

But it is precisely Karas's well-burnished reputation as a European politician that is now posing some difficult questions for the ÖVP and its Chancellor Sebastian Kurz. In the 2017 national elections, Kurz succeeded with the electorate largely by focusing his [campaign message](#) on past mistakes by the European Union and Austria in migration policy, and by promising to forcefully remedy those mistakes in the future. Meanwhile, as party leader, he favoured outsider candidates over established ÖVP party political figures, and he chose [loyalists from his inner circle](#) to fill his top government posts.



Sebastian Kurz and Othmar Karas at a discussion in Salzburg, Credit: [Junge ÖVP](#) (CC BY-ND 2.0)

Cut from the fabric of the old ÖVP, Othmar Karas has name recognition, a clear European agenda, and electability. In the months ahead, Kurz will have to decide whether to select him to lead the party into the 2019 EP elections. And that decision is tied to the bigger question Kurz faces: namely, can his political style and vision for the party accommodate a European leader from outside his inner circle – and perhaps even a dissenting voice?

Since last year's national election, Karas has emerged as just such a dissenting voice within the ÖVP, and a counterweight to Sebastian Kurz, particularly on subjects that touch upon EU priorities. As the current rotating president of the European Council, for example, Kurz has foregrounded his hardline stance on refugees, [tabling discussions](#) of refugee redistribution the European Union, and pushing for [national measures](#) to address the refugee influx. Concurrent with that, Karas has appeared in German and Austria media advocating a [European-wide](#) solution to the refugee situation, rejecting national solutions or individual measures, and [expressing solidarity](#) with the frontline countries Greece, Italy, and Spain. Similarly, on the litmus test of whether to criticise Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Kurz has largely [remained quiet](#), a response that clashes with the [early](#) and [outspoken](#) opposition of Karas.

Such areas of disagreement may not trouble Kurz greatly. Karas does stake a clear position. But he identifies himself as a pro-Europe politician, rather than as a Kurz critic or rival, and he carefully avoids direct confrontation with the ÖVP. Of course, where the far-right, Eurosceptic Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) is concerned, Karas is far less circumspect. When FPÖ General Secretary and MEP Harald Vilimsky capitalised on video footage of an unsteady Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker by [declaring that the Commission President](#) had an alcohol problem and should leave office, Karas called such antics [unworthy of a governing party](#), and demanded that Vilimsky apologise – even as the national ÖVP leadership indicated it [had no comment](#). Karas has also called FPÖ demands that the EU remove its sanctions on Russia “[pure populism and irresponsible](#).”

Such directness is not the stuff of which political partnerships are made, and Karas [acknowledges that he has to respect](#) the ÖVP-FPÖ governing coalition at home. But he quickly adds that loyalty to Austria cannot mean that he should avoid a debate on the future of Europe with “Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Matteo Salvini, or the FPÖ.” Of his open criticism, Karas said in a recent [Puls 4 television interview](#), “I am not in a coalition with the FPÖ.” For Karas, to be sure, defying the FPÖ is consistent with his political loyalties to Brussels and the EU project.

But for Sebastian Kurz, who [values cooperation](#) between the two coalition partners, the continued defiance of Karas presents a dilemma. If he selects Karas to lead the ÖVP in the 2019 European Parliament elections, he will have a voice from within his own party certain to antagonise his coalition partner. And choosing Karas means virtually ensuring that inter-parliamentary conflicts in Brussels will find their way back to Austria, where they will play out with different and potentially unpredictable consequences.

To be sure, not choosing Karas as the lead candidate for the elections also carries with it risks. One risk is that it could cost his party the plurality it achieved in the 2014 European Parliament elections. Karas is a well-tested candidate with a record of winning votes on his own, and he will not be easily replaced. [Fears that Kurz and the ÖVP need to win](#) the 2019 elections or face reinvigorating the opposition Social Democrats (SPÖ) are likely premature. For the foreseeable future, there seems [little to worry about](#) from the SPÖ. Nevertheless, the old pro-Europe wing of the ÖVP is sidelined, not vanquished. An Othmar Karas spurned by Kurz could take those voters with him to another party, most likely the New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS). And though it would [present some obstacles](#), Karas could also run as the pro-Europe candidate leading his own list.

At the very least, if the ÖVP entered the EP elections without Karas heading its list, the party would need to have made peace with the likelihood that it would have reduced representation in the European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament. That would not sit well with either Manfred Weber, who is [gearing up](#) his campaign to become the next EU Commission President, or German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is supporting him. Some [recent reports](#) have Kurz already planning to bind Karas [closer to the ÖVP](#) by naming him as the next Austrian Commissioner to the European Union. That, however, is far in the future, and Karas has already [said that leading the ÖVP candidate list](#) and serving as Commissioner are not mutually exclusive.

It is a long-standing complaint against the European Parliament elections that they lack excitement and a good story. Voter turnout in recent elections [has been low](#) and the democratic legitimacy of the European Union has been weakened as a result. In the upcoming EP election, the EU will [devote €30 million to improving turnout](#). But if the drama unfolding in Austria provides any insight, election debates that highlight the differences between domestic politics and European priorities, and force national leaders to take a position between the two, might be a good recipe for bringing voters to the polls.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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